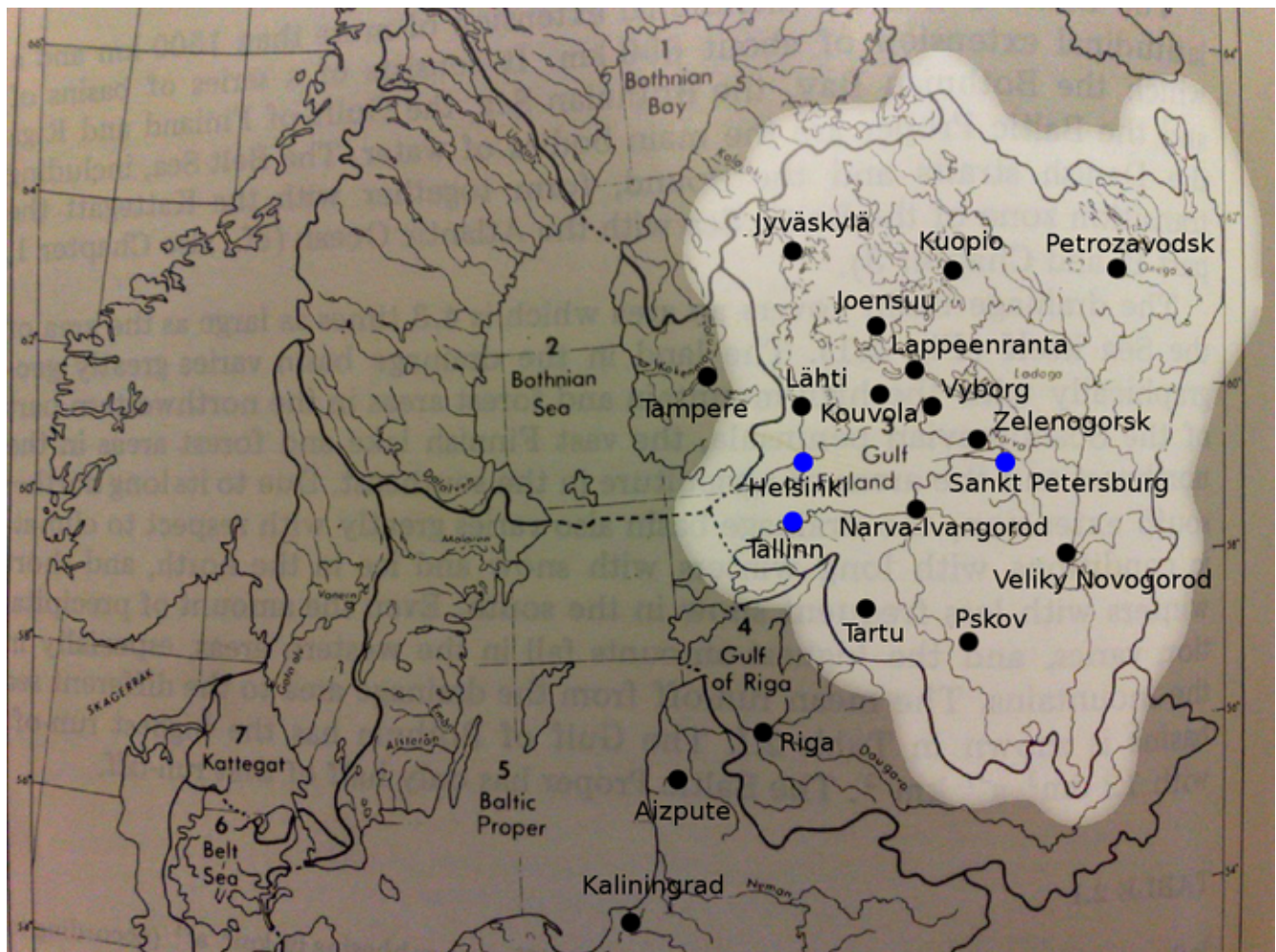


Ecogeographic Cultural Production? Appropriate Networking in Pixelache Helsinki & Network

Andrew Gryf Paterson, 25.10.2016.



Adaptation by the author of graphic illustration in Westing, A. H. (1989).

Abstract

This article introduces the issues of aligning ecology and sustainability in the cultural production of Pixelache Helsinki's Festival and network. It focuses upon what might be an 'appropriate' form of cultural networking, and argues for an ecogeographic approach in the future. The ecogeographic case example given is that of the Eastern Baltic Sea.

Keywords

Cultural Networks, Appropriate Networking, Sustainability, Ecogeography, Helsinki, Eastern Baltic Sea, Gulf of Finland

Introduction

Short distances between cities surrounding the Baltic sea means that locals have been busy with trade and cultural exchange for centuries. At different times the cultural, linguistic, economic and political formations of their surrounding nation-states have both eased and made more difficult that process. There are several regional and transnational high-level cooperative frameworks which focus on the Baltic Sea Region, such as the European Commission's HELCOM¹ and The Union of Baltic Cities.² Furthermore in recent years Oleg Koefoed from Cultura21 Nordic was commissioned by Nordic Council of Ministers to undertake research on the relationship between cultural production and sustainability in the region (Aidt, 2013; Koefoed, 2013).³

In this short essay I focus on one cultural association from Helsinki, Finland—Pixelache Helsinki—with the example of its year-round educational programme which I coordinated and facilitated from the beginning of 2011 until 2014 - three intensive years of related cultural exchange around the Eastern Baltic Sea. In that position I argued for a renewed effort for mobility and exchange around the eastern side of the Baltic Sea region, re-invigorating the concept of the “Gulf of Finland Community,” and introducing the concept of an 'ecogeographic' approach to cultural production.

I write from the perspective of an artist-organiser in the cultural field, who has adopted different approaches from network culture and applied them to temporary collaborative productions in Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Belarus during my years based in the Baltic Sea region. I am also interested in writing narratives about these experiences, and connect them to practice-led cultural research, as well as to cooperative-minded research and pedagogy. At the beginning of 2011, I was employed part-time by the Finnish non-profit cultural association known as [Pixelache](#) to facilitate and coordinate an informal outreach and pedagogical programme called 'Pixelversity' as part of Pixelache Helsinki activities. I have written elsewhere on the same topic in a longer and more detailed article (Paterson, 2012), on which this edited version is based. As my proposal emerges from this work, I will first elaborate briefly on the underlying motivations of the Pixelversity programme and give an

¹ European Commission (1992-). The Helsinki Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area. Webpage. Accessible from <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/marine/international-cooperation/regional-sea-conventions/helcom/>

² The Union of Baltic Cities (n.a.). Webpage. Accessible from <http://www.ubc.net>

³ Disclaimer: This author was also a contributor to the related research as an interviewee, and was a presenter at the Nordic Council's seminar in Copenhagen in which Cultura21 Nordic presented the research commission report on April 29, 2013. Further information is accessible from <http://www.norden.org/en/news-and-events/news/culture-will-play-key-role-in-development-of-the-baltic-sea-region>

overview of my proposed orientation towards the Gulf of Finland as the basis for *appropriate networking for cultural production*, hinting at future aspirations and connections.



Paterson presenting 'Pixeliversity' at Plektrum Festival, Tallinn, Autumn 2011. Image credit: Antti Ahonen, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/anttia/6155604517>

“Appropriate networking” for cultural production borrows a concept from permacultural development and appropriate technology applications, with creative applied design and technology for sustainability issues, such as renewable energy, clean water filtration, bio-remediation, or compost systems. The global Permaculture movement started by David Holmgren (b. 1955) and the recently deceased Bill Mollison (1928–2016) in the late 1970s in Australia is an inspiration as it is imperative to work with, rather than against nature; “of protracted and thoughtful observation rather than protracted and thoughtless labor” (Mollison, 1991). Its online equivalent may be the Appropedia.org network, initiated by Lonny Grafman, that brings a similar spirit to networked knowledge-sharing practices around the world. Grafman is inspired by the economist E. F. Schumacher, who over 40 years ago developed the

concept of *intermediate or appropriate technology*, or “technology with a human face” (Schumacher, 1999). In general, according to Grafman, the consensus is that such technologies are those which can be maintained, used, repaired, operated, retrofitted by the actual stakeholders, “a technology that’s not just designed *for* but [...] designed *with* the stakeholders.” (Grafman, 2016).

Context of Pixelache Helsinki

Pixelache Helsinki is a trans-disciplinary platform for developing and presenting experimental art, design, research and activist projects since 2002. However, it is also an organised network of people – currently approximately 30 association members, 1 full-time coordinator and 1 part-time staff member year-round, plus a handful of fee-based staff during the festival period or funded projects. About one third of members are regularly active in Helsinki; approximately one third are active but based remotely or often travelling outside Finland; and about one third are less active members; as well as a network of regular friends or unaffiliated associates in the Nordic-Baltic region or further afield. Many participants in this network use Pixelache Helsinki as the main way to present their recent professional practice, research or approach to art, design or technology; for others it is a fun, hobby-oriented event to test or experiment with prototypes; while for some lucky handful it is a mix of both.

Although it is true that as members we have become good friends, collaborators and peers in the development of Pixelache Helsinki, academically one could interpret it as a cluster of several communities of practice, who share concern and passion for what they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger, 1998). Included in this regular interaction are processes used with each other, with other organisations and institutions, as well as with other publics and communities in the format of a cultural festival or via other projects/processes. Early in Pixelache Helsinki's development, a social science paper by Katri Halonen identified the strong co-relations between open-source ideology and the thematic and organisational structure of the festival (Halonen, 2007). However, the interests within this organised network are broad and not always easy for outsiders to understand.

Pixelache Helsinki is and has been part of a regional and international network of similar practitioners, organisers and producers, with qualities that Ned Rossiter claims characterizes networks: “fluid, ephemeral, transitory, innovative, flowing, non-linear, decentralized, value-adding, creative, flexible, open, collaborative, risk-taking, reflexive, informal, individualized, intense, transformative and so on” (Rossiter, 2006: 46). Rossiter refers to organised networks as “loose affiliations where participants have the freedom to come and go” (ibid, 2016: 22). Most often cultural networking happens via sharing

information about events and ideas online, as well as with travel to attend gatherings or festivals. I argue that this should ideally be done in accordance with the synergetic relations of natureculture⁴ with protracted and thoughtful observation and (net)working.



Recycling Olympic Games award ceremony as the last event of Pixelache Festival 2016. Image credit: Antti Ahonen.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/anttia/30228569291/>

In coordinating and facilitating the Pixelversity programme between 2011-2014, discussing regularly with key participants, I considered relationships between different activities, imagining how they may build up cumulative knowledge and skills towards future Pixelache Helsinki activities. For example, in the first years there was an emerging interest from Piknik Frequency association members related to energy use, knowledge sharing, social engagement, and towards 'transition/resilience' themed activities and events. Considering the Baltic Sea regional scene, these interests have also found inspiration, company and informal collaboration with partners in Estonia and Latvia.⁵ The holistic vision of [Green](#)

4 'Natureculture' is an anthropological term which contests that there is a dichotomous relation between Nature and Culture, recognising continual living and biotic relationships between both, and conceptually counters the alienation of Man and Nature. Further reading on this alienation can be found in El-Kamel Bakari (2004).

[Economics](#), as presented by Molly Scott-Cato (2009), was also a strong influence at the time, leading to further research.

The topic of sustainability I argue is firstly not just relevant as a subject in our fields of practice and theory, but also relates to personal economical sustainability in a period of financial uncertainty, and specifically within cultural funding structures. Secondly, it is important in relation to our practice in our particular locality, in this case our region of the Gulf of Finland, the Baltic Sea region, and North East Europe. What are appropriate ways to work within organised networks, as part of the increased interest within our scenes for topics of transition/resilience, renewable art, technologies and sustainability?

Considering the ecogeographic region model

In early November 2011, I presented Pixelversity 2011 activities at the [RIXC Centre for New Media Culture](#) Art+Communications Festival Conference in Riga,⁶ and with this review, I also introduced the concept of an 'ecogeographic' approach to cultural organising and production, which was later published by the same organisation (Paterson, 2012).

This perspective was originally inspired by conversations from 2007 onwards with marine biologist, artist and activist Richard Thompson Coon, resident of Suomenlinna until 2013, in Helsinki, where we first met. Coon founded and chaired the environmental non-governmental organisation (NGO) called Gulf of Finland Environment Society SULA, which was active in the 1990s and early 2000s in the Eastern Baltic Sea. Through a multi-faceted, trans-cultural and trans-disciplinary environmental agenda and activism, his colleagues regularly gathered people together in educational events. For example, in 1996, natural scientists, musicians, artists and school children from Finland, Russia and Estonia gathered on Suomenlinna, a historical island fortress in Finland, to address the environmental situation of the Gulf of Finland. Many years later, he still advocated for continued grassroots, trans-cultural and trans-disciplinary initiatives related to the Baltic Sea region, and the Gulf of Finland in particular. Key from his point of view is the need to continue invigorating the idea of a "Gulf of Finland Community". This community, according to Coon, should be understood as including not just humans, but also

⁵ In particular the 'MIM goes sustainable' project in Tallinn between 2009-2011 (accessible from <http://mimproject.org>) and RIXC Centre for New Media Culture's '[Renewable Network](#)' project also from 2009 ongoing, accessible from <http://renewable.rixc.lv>

⁶ RIXC Centre for New Media Culture. (2011). 'Techno-ecologies' Conference. *Art+Communications Festival*. 4-5.11.2011. Riga. Accessible from <http://rixc.lv/11/en/conference.info.html>

animals and plants; the whole ecosystem. The idea of a community which spreads over a geographical territory, based on ecological principles, may be called an "Ecogeographic community."⁷

As political theorist and peace researcher Arthur Westing defines it, an "ecogeographic region" denotes a "geographical area that is unified in an ecological sense, gaining its integrity from this cohesion"; by extension, an 'ecogeographic region' is "an ecological system, or ecosystem.. a unit made up of living and 'non-living' components of the environment that interact to form a life-support system". For example this may be "seas with their associated drainage basins (watersheds, catchment areas), major rivers with their associated drainage basins, major mountain ranges, major islands or peninsulas, insular aggregations, deserts, tundras, and permanently ice-covered areas" (Westing, 1989: 2). Hence, an ecogeographic approach would mean, in the case of the Gulf of Finland, not just the ecosystem population around the coast, but also that extending all the way to the edge of its water drainage basin. Westing opens his thesis "Comprehensive security for the Baltic: An environmental approach" with the question: "[T]o what extent does regional cooperation on environmental protection and nature-resource utilization serve as a confidence-building measure for the purpose of fostering comprehensive international security?" (ibid: 1). In other words, how does it help develop further shared common value and interest among stakeholders?



Image of Participants at Camp Pixelache 2013 on Naissaar island, Estonia. Image credit: Antti Ahonen.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/antti/9189881852/>

Returning to the cultural organisational field, as an artist-organiser, I believe in the necessity to develop trans-disciplinary capacities to engage on/in Commons issues; that cultural workers and producers can contribute to environmental protection and sustainable nature-resource utilization/management, and that active cultural organisations should lead the way by example, especially those with network-building and facilitation experience.

⁷ Note there are many similarities in collaboration with Raymond Dasmann in the early 1970s described as "Bioregionalism" (Berg, 2001).

This approach raises a set of questions and thoughts that are relevant to consider: What will be the effect on cultural organisational work if we do our networking mostly within our ecogeographic subregion of the Baltic Sea, that is, the Gulf of Finland, including portions of Finland, North-West Russia, and Estonia? For example, this could include cultural exchange and co-production between the 3 'capital' cities of Helsinki, Tallinn and St Petersburg, as well as with population centres and regions as broadly circumferential as Lahti, Jyväskylä, Kuopio in Finland; Petrozavodsk, Veliky Novgorod, Pskov, Russia; as well as Narva and Tartu in Estonia. What have been the challenges in the environmental NGO scene across the region, and how can we learn from their experiences? Where do we—in the trans-disciplinary media arts and cultural scene—find the resources and finances to support networking? Should the funding instruments support this from the top-down? Can we or will we have to raise grassroots support from the bottom-up? If so, who would be good partners and collaborators?

In answer to the above questions, I argue that it is necessary to include—beyond experimental art, design and technology, individuals and various organisations—cross-sectoral collaborations with the environmental NGO scene, including institutional scientific research, cultural associations and activist groups, schools and educational/participatory science groups. An example from the latter sector from outside the cultural scene is [ДРУЗЬЯ БАЛТИКИ](#) (Friends of the Baltic), who have organised the *Baltic Sea Ambassadors* project that compiled and presented ecological knowledge about the Baltic Sea and related sustainable practices, in schools around the region (Senova, 2011).

Concluding remarks

Reflecting upon our friendships, partnerships and collaborations that have developed over the years of Pixelache Helsinki, as well as upon attempts to collaborate beyond the art and cultural field(s), I argue that from an ecogeographic perspective we should be engaging with our human and non-human peers with whom we share the most fundamental Commons. In other words, develop *appropriate networks* among those who rely upon and live with the same constraints and affordances. Acknowledging the work of Gulf of Finland environmental networks and cooperation, what *is absolutely shared and shared in common*, despite the variable cultures, languages and political-state differences, is the Eastern Baltic sea, its extended hydrosphere and water-drainage basin on surrounding land areas, and other related environmental, atmospheric systems; essentially the watershed of the Gulf of Finland. In relation to *this* network, social and economic sustainability of practice can also be considered. The increasingly urgent and fundamental challenge in future regional cultural productions, collaborations

and conflicts will be to take these commonalities into account as the basis for cooperation, as the basis for strengthening the appropriate networking vision of ecogeographic cultural community.

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Biography

Andrew Gryf Paterson (Scotland/Finland) is an "artist-organiser", cultural producer, educator and independent researcher, based since late 2002 in Helsinki, Finland. He has been closely connected to Pixelache Helsinki for over 12 years, and is completing his Doctoral of Arts thesis at the Media Department of Aalto University ARTS. More or less archived here: <http://agryfp.info> [<http://archive.org/details/@agryfp>]

Mandate of Pixelache festival

The name Pixelache was originally found in the early 2000s in a Finnish article that predicted new words which we would need in the future. The word 'pikseliähy' (translated into English as "pixelache") was supposed to describe the feeling that results from an overdose of digital media content. This overdose can happen easily if the content is too monotonous – which is the case if standards, formats, tools and design principles converge to a narrow set of options. Later interpretations focused more on the 'ache' of digital influence in everyday life, and an 'ache' to re-engage with non-digital interfaces and systems. Pixelache seeks to challenge mainstream standards and conventions, not only related to media and technology, but of contemporary society in general.

Pixelache has been regularly presented as being involved with experimental interaction and electronics, code-based art and culture, grassroot organising & networks, renewable energy production/use, participatory art, open-source cultures, bioarts and art-science culture, alternative economy cultures, politics and economics of media/technology, audiovisual culture, media literacy & ecology and engaging environmental issues. Further info can be accessed from <http://pixelache.ac/pages/about>